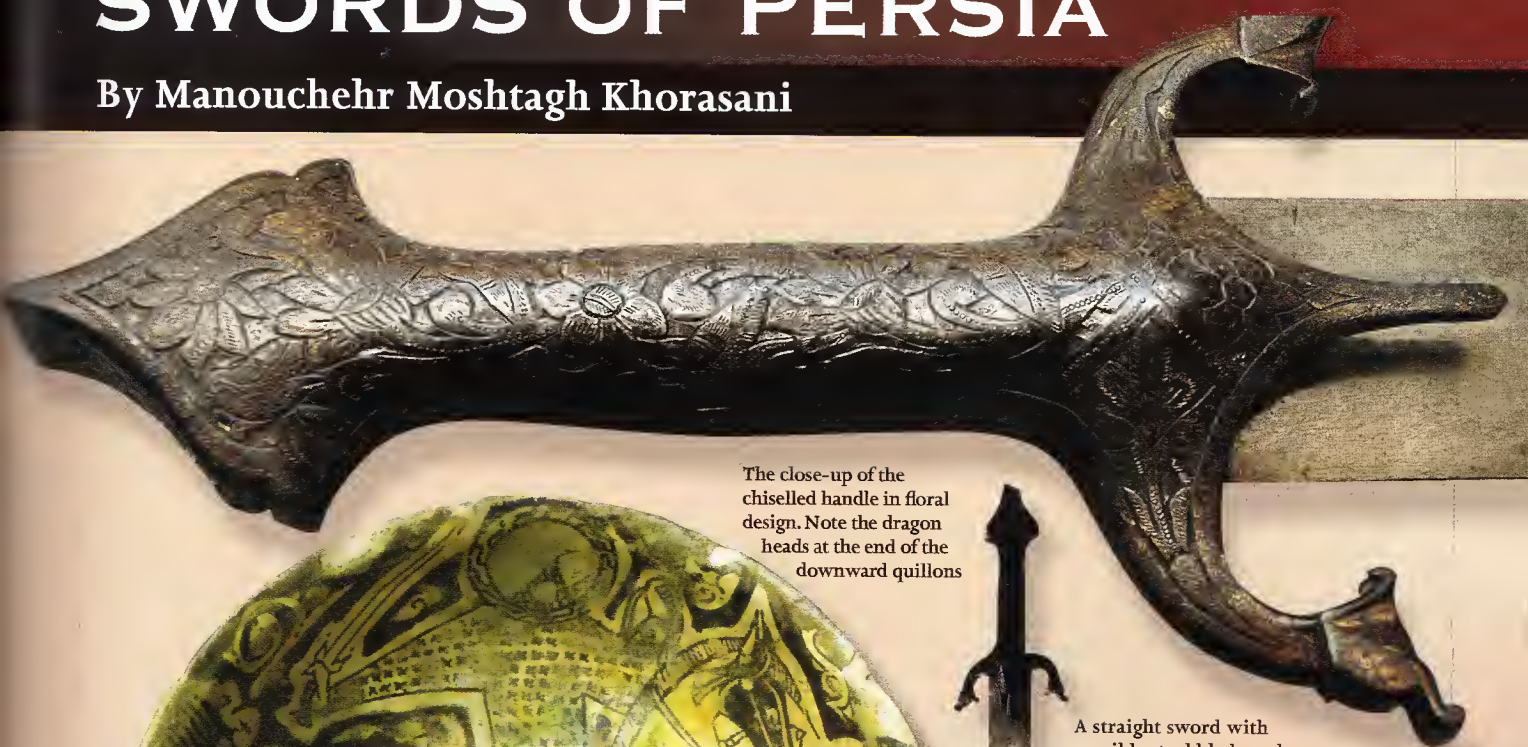


Dragons' Teeth

THE STRAIGHT SWORDS OF PERSIA

By Manouchehr Moshtagh Khorasani



The close-up of the chiselled handle in floral design. Note the dragon heads at the end of the downward quillons

A straight sword with a crucible steel blade and a chiselled handle from the Qajar period (1794-1925 AD)



A glazed bowl from the Samanid period (819-1000 AD).

Note the mounted warrior is wielding a straight, double-edged sword with downward quillons in his right hand (Courtesy of Reza Abbasi Museum)

Persian straight swords are equally as beautiful as their curved counterparts.

The Safavid-period manuscript *D st n Hossein Kord-e Shabestari* distinguishes a type of sword named *shamsh r- do dam*

(see *D st n Hossein Kord-e Shabestari*, 2003/1382:167). One should note that *dam* means 'edge' and the literal translation for this term means 'a sword with two edges', i.e. straight double-edged swords. As I have already mentioned in 'Blades of the Lion's Tail: Birth of the Shamsh r' (see CAAM XIV 5), the term *shamsh r* does not relate specifically to a curved sword, but is a general term and used in Persian to refer to any type of sword, including those with straight blades: Persian manuscripts often use additional adjectives to specify the difference, such as *shamsh r- kaj* and *shamsh r- kham* (both meaning curved sword). Later on, during the Qajar period, the term *shamsh r- kaj- Qezelb shi* (the curved sword of the Qezelbash) was used to refer to the curved swords used by the Safavid fighters the 'Qezelbash' (see the Qajar-period manuscript *Rostam al T varikh*, Asef, 2003/1382:97).

A linguistic analysis of different Iranian manuscripts

from a variety of periods when swords with curved blades were predominantly used, shows that straight, double-edged swords were also much in evidence. This often comes as a surprise to the Western researcher, believing that all blades of the East share the familiar elegant curve of the sabre – but



Other than *shamshir-ē do dam*, another term for straight double-edged swords encountered by the researcher is *shamshir-ē dorūyē* which literally means 'double-sided sword'; this was used in the Qajar-period manuscript *Zafarnāme*, but in the same manuscript the term *shamshir-ē yekrūy* (one-sided sword) is used as well, to refer to single-edged swords—meaning single-edged curved swords (see *Zafarnāme*, Nāderi, 1968/1346:191). As well as the above, in Persian manuscripts the term *tigh* (literally blade) is used to refer to a sword. Accordingly, there are also accompanying adjectives with *tigh* to specify straight and/or curved swords, such as *tigh-ē kaj* (curved blade/sword) from the Afsharid-period manuscript *Tarikh-e Jahāngoshāy-e Nāderi*, and the Qajar-period manuscripts *Shahanshahnāme* and *Zafarnāme*. On the other hand, *tigh-ē rāst* (straight blade/sword) is used in the Qajar-period manuscript *Zafarnāme* to refer to a straight blade/sword (see Nāderi, 1968/1346:52). In spite of the existence of these specific and somewhat complex names, in the majority of cases the terms *shamshir* and *tigh* are used on their own to refer to any type of sword regardless of its shape.

Historical background

Most swords during the Achaemenian period (559 BC–330 BC) had short, double-edged blades generally no more than 65cm in length. However, evidence from a sculpted stone relief of the period proves that some longer swords existed as well. During the Parthian period (250 BC–228 AD), blades became longer, and

A straight sword with a crucible steel blade and a gilded handle

A glazed bowl from the Samanid period (819–1000 AD). Note that the mounted warrior is carrying a curved sword in his left hand. The two glazed bowls prove that during the Samanid period (819–1000 AD) both curved and straight swords coexisted. (Courtesy of Reza Abbasi Museum)

this tradition of making long, straight swords continued into the Sassanian period (241–651 AD). The Arab invaders of Iran also used similar straight-bladed, double-edged swords against the Sassanian armies, and thus the tradition of using straight-bladed swords in Iran continued even after the Arab Conquest of 651 AD.

Outside Iran, the term *shamshir* is given only to the highly curved type of Persian sword. However, as I stated above, it should be kept in mind that the term *shamshir* is a generic Persian word for any kind of sword. It is also important to take into consideration that although the classic Iranian *shamshir* reached the height of its popularity during the Safavid period, straight, double-edged swords were still being used by Qezelbash troops. Allan states that the standard sword used by the Persians during the Safavid period was the sabre, which was a slashing, single-edged weapon best suited to use on horseback. However, he also refers to the records of Tenreiro, who stated that the Qezelbash in the era of Shah Ismail used both sabres and double-edged swords. Allan illustrates a fine example of such a double-edged sword



from the early Safavid period. This sword has a tapering, flattened, diamond section blade with two converging fullers running for over half its length.

There are also examples of double-edged Iranian swords from the late 15th century AD with wider blades. Allan illustrates one such example kept in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Although the blade of this double-edged sword is Persian from the late 15th century, the hilt and quillon are European and were clearly mounted on the blade at a later date. The blade is 89.6cm long and 5.1cm wide, inlaid with gold and silver. The total length of the sword, including the European hilt, is 113.2cm. According to Allan this blade belongs to a group of four swords in collections in Vienna, Munich, and Dresden. All of these swords are straight and double-edged, depicting the motif of an *ejdeha* (dragon) and a *simorgh* (phoenix) in combat. Allan is of the opinion that this motif is evidence of Chinese influence: the dragon and the phoenix were introduced into Persian art through the Mongol Conquests in the 13th century AD. However, one should

note that both dragons and the legendary *simorgh* were featured in the earlier *Shahname*. Taking into consideration the fact that Ferdowsi based his *Shahname* on ancient Iranian myths, it is clear that both creatures had existed in Persian mythology long before their possible adoption from Chinese culture. Matufi (1999/1378:582) states that double-edged straight swords with the emblem of the fighting scene between a dragon and a *simorgh* were already in use during the Timurid era, at the same time as curved blades.

The Qajar period (1794-1925) also saw the production of a number of straight-bladed swords. Qajar kings considered themselves the heirs of the Safavid traditions as their forefathers had been educated by the Safavid court in Isfahan, therefore straight-bladed swords were consistent with that tradition. In other words, the making of these straight-bladed swords in the Qajar period was most likely a continuation of an older tradition from the Safavid period. Lebedynsky (1992:56) states that the later straight swords (such as Qajar straight swords) share the same features as their medieval ancestors. These Iranian swords of the 17th and 18th centuries have blades with a rounded tip, downward quillons, and a three-lobed pommel and thus share the same feature of the grip as on some older swords.

Fittings: symbolism of the dragon

The grip of straight-bladed swords consists of two different halves of metal soldered together. The soldering generally appears faultless, and the seam normally cannot be seen on these pieces. The tang of the blade is inserted into the grip, and a melted adhesive material is poured in such a way that, after drying, the tang of the blade is attached to the grip. There is no additional rivet going through the tang providing extra support. One interesting feature of these swords is the frequent presence of dragon heads or stylised dragon heads at the end of quillons. A morphological analysis of dragon heads on Iranian metal objects shows that dragon heads not only appear on sword handles but also on a number of other metal objects as well, such as Iranian standards dating from the 14th century AD. Allan and Gilmour point out that military, religious and royal metal standards had also been used in early times in Iran, as witnessed by



Above left: Akvān-ē Div attacking Rostam in sleep taken from a *Shāhnāme* from the Safavid period (1502-1722 AD). Note the *div* (demon) is carrying a straight, double-edged sword (Courtesy of Golestan Palace Museum)



Above right: Rostam is fighting the army of *div-hā* (demons) from a manuscript of the *Shāhnāme* from 1212 hegira (1797 AD). Note that one of the demons is holding a straight, double-edged sword (Courtesy of Astan-e Qods Razavi)

bronze standards from Luristan and those of the Sassanians and Achaemenians before Alexander the Great. Similar downward dragon heads, as those on the quillons of Iranian straight swords, appear as ornamentation on standards by the second half of the 14th century AD, and possibly served as a royal military emblem. Although there were many kinds of standards, a special design with a pear-shaped centre, an ornamental point, and double dragons with their heads turned outwards rather than inwards, began to dominate standard design some time in the mid-15th century AD.

Far right: A straight sword with an etched blade

Centre right: A straight sword with a crucible steel blade and an enamelled handle from the Qajar period (1794-1925 AD)

Right: Close-up of the enamelled handle



Detail of a miniature from the *Shāhnāme* from 1272 hegira (1855 AD). Note the man on the right is wearing a straight sword

Taking the royal symbolism of the dragon into consideration, as discussed by Melikian Chirvani, one might argue that the appearance of dragons on quillons of straight swords and standards was originally used to indicate the royal service of these objects. Possibly the use of dragons later spread to different types of metal objects, but there are other interpretations of the dragons' significance. Allan and Gilmour

refer to a contemporary standard-maker from Isfahan named Hossein Bahman, who asserts that the dragon heads around the central, pierced, and inscribed sheet are there to protect the Qur'anic verses with their fiery breath.

These dragon heads on standards resemble the dragon heads on the grip of Iranian straight swords from the Qajar period or even earlier. Haase et al. (1993:166–7) describe a pearl-shaped dragon standard with a height of 44cm and a diameter of 29cm. He dates it to the 17th century AD but is uncertain whether it is from Iran or Turkey. However, the very existence of inscriptions carrying the name of Ali and also the 'Fatima's hand' engraved on both sides indicate a Shiite and, thus, Iranian origin. Six fearsome-looking dragons with crests and teeth are placed on this standard, three on each side. Earlier straight swords dating to before the 17th century AD had equally fearsome-looking dragons, also with crests and teeth, such as those on the quillons of a straight sword with a 16th century blade and 17th century mounts (see Levykin 2002:179). Comparing the dragon heads on the Shiite standard to dragon heads on the quillons of later Qajar straight swords, it seems that over the course of time, the dragons' appearance becomes tame: by the Qajar period, the quillon dragons have lost their teeth and crests.



The crucible steel pattern (top) and (above) close-up of the gold-inlaid inscriptions of the sword on page 22

According to Allan and Gilmour (2000:446), the more aggressive-looking dragons, bristling with teeth and extremely fearsome in appearance, also feature as a part of a group of heavily made, dramatically rendered, dragon-headed flint strikers that have their origins in 15th century AD Turkoman paintings. These aggressive-looking dragons' heads were attached to a variety of objects, many of them with crests, and there were

Fighting scene from the manuscript *Hezār va Yek Shab* (One Thousand and One Nights) 1269 hegira (1852 AD). Note two straight double-edged swords with downward quillons on the ground to the right and one broken straight sword on the ground to the left (Courtesy of Golestan Palace Museum)



many examples with teeth to emphasise their ferocity. However, Allan and Gilmour also refer to a flint striker with a dragon head with significantly more refined features, both in its head and in the symmetrical, arabesque-shaped end to its body, dating to the early Safavid period as a synthesis between the Timurid and the Turkoman groups.

Although dragon heads appear on quillons late in the 15th and 16th centuries AD, their use on standards has a very long tradition in Iran. On this subject, Wilcox (2001:13) states that a wide variety of shapes and sizes of standards was used between Parthians and Sassanians. From the accounts of Roman historians, the largest unit in the Parthian army consisted of 1,000 soldiers and was called *ejdeha* or 'dragon' and carried dragon-shaped standards before them. The dragon standard was considered very formidable, the head of which was in the shape of a dragon mounted on a spear, its neck designed much like a wind sock. Upon the wind blowing, this sock would inflate and move like the dragon's tail, also emitting animal-like noises (see Zoka, 1971/1350). Zoka also states that the Parthians were especially fond of dragon designs, but the reasoning behind this is still unclear. Parthian kings wore necklaces in the shape of a dragon encircling the neck (the body in the shape of a snake). This is clearly visible on Parthian coins.

Titley (1981:4) observes that in contrast to the Chinese dragon, which has a benign and friendly character, the Iranian dragon is fierce and quarrelsome. Another remarkable difference is that contrary to the Chinese art motif where the dragon and qilin are friends, in Iranian art, these two creatures are mortal enemies, often wrestling each other in interlocked positions. In Iranian legends, dragons symbolised a threat to the entire population, frequently exterminating all the inhabitants of an area, and, therefore, the heroes in the *Shahname* were called upon to kill dragons, either in face-to-face combat or by using clever subterfuge. The use of the dragons on sword quillons therefore has ancient cultural connotations in Iran.

Straight sword types

As described above, straight swords with blades terminating in dragon heads were created even during the Timurid era. This tradition continued to the Safavid period and was later set forth during the Qajar

period.

During the Qajar period, straight swords began to be made with etched blades. These blades were normally etched along their entire length with inscriptions, figures, and floral designs. It should be noted, however, that such etching was not restricted to straight-bladed swords. There are also examples of curved swords with the same etched patterns as well as a number of other weapons, such as etched armours, shields and axes.

In general, the blades of Iranian straight swords from the Qajar era can be classified into two different varieties: [a] straight swords with crucible steel blades and [b] straight swords with etched high carbon blades. Swords bearing crucible steel blades normally have a sham pattern and can be found with different degrees of quality or ornamentation. Some have beautiful, enamelled hilts and some handles are inlaid or overlaid with gold.

Not all straight swords from the Qajar period have downward quillons ending in dragon heads – some Qajar quillons end in spatulate ends. One example from the Military Museum of Tehran (museum inventory number 117) has beautiful engravings with floral designs at its forte. The handle looks the same as other Qajar straight swords, but the quillon ends in rounded knobs, just as is the case with Iranian curved swords. This example has a watered blade in a sham pattern, but its most interesting feature is that the blade widens towards the tip, which is unusual for this type of sword.

Plain steel (high carbon) blades can be found with chiselled decoration at the base, heavily etched, or indeed without any decoration at all. The etching was less labour intensive in comparison to chiselling. Etching was developed late in the Qajar period and was a less expensive alternative to engraving (see Motamen Reid, 1985:1). Allan and Gilmour describe the process of etching according to contemporary standards as follows: first, the inscription to be left in relief is painted with lacquer and alcohol; next, the inscriptions are left to dry; the steel is then dipped in acid. This results in an inscription in low relief

The close-up of the crucible steel blade with gold-inlaid inscriptions of a Persian poem. The full sword is shown on page 21

leaving the background slightly textured. It is important to take into consideration that the quality of etching on these blades also differs from one piece to another. Some come in very high-quality etching, indicating that the etching process was repeated several times, while some are of poor quality. It is also important to realise that some of these etched pieces come with a sharp blade. Some of them are only sharp from the final third, near the tip. It must be kept in mind that an etched blade does not necessarily mean that these blades were not functional. Fully functional butchers' meat-cleavers were also etched in the same manner.

Co-existence

As discussed above, the curved shamshir replaced the straight swords over the course of time, but this does not mean that the production of straight-bladed swords ceased altogether and suddenly resumed during the Qajar period. There are examples of double-edged Iranian blades from the Timurid period and, later, the Safavid forces were also equipped with double-edged swords in the battle of Chaldaran. It is not surprising to see that Qajar kings, who considered themselves true heirs to the Safavid Dynasty, made straight, double-edged swords as well. This was likely a continuation of an old tradition of making double-edged swords in Iran and not a revival of early Islamic/Arab blades used by the early Muslim forces.

Full references available on request.